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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002452

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF PREL JO

SUBJECT: JORDAN: POSITIVE REACTION TO INTL. RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM REPORT

REF: A. AMMAN 2385

1B. AMMAN 2227

1C. AMMAN 2018

1D. AMMAN 1115

1E. AMMAN 990

1F. AMMAN 569

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Jordan's religious minorities are pleased with the content of the 2009 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report and believe that it accurately depicts the level of religious freedom in Jordan. Minority groups were happy that a relative lack of gross religious freedom violations during the reporting period meant that the report focused on underlying and systemic obstacles to further religious freedom. The government lauded the report in the media claiming that it shows that Jordan is a model for coexistence. However, an inter-ministerial human rights committee will formally review the report and issue an official response. The media largely focused on accolades given to Jordan's inter-faith dialogue efforts and positive aspects in the report, though many articles did mention restrictions to religious freedom. Some Christian contacts would like the report to place more emphasis on education as they believe Jordanian youth are becoming less tolerant and less moderate. They believe the government has been unwilling or unable to address problematic curriculum and "fanatical" teachers. Post is using the report as another tool in on-going efforts to press the government for improvements in religious freedom, especially for unrecognized groups, and for further education reform. End Summary.

Christian Denominations, Baha'i Pleased

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12. (SBU) Post contacts from a range of Christian denominations, as well as the Baha'i, were pleased with the report's content and believed that it accurately highlighted the religious freedom situation in Jordan. While many acknowledged that the 2009 report did not offer anything "new," they agreed that the past year was "quiet" in terms of gross religious freedom violations, with very few instances of apostasy cases, official harassment, or church closures. There was also wide agreement on many of the religious freedom problems identified in the report, such as application of Shari'a law and lack of recognition for some churches and other religions.

13. (C) Most Evangelical church leaders also expressed relief at this year's report. (Note: A couple more vocal Evangelical church leaders did privately tell Poloffs that the report should have been stronger on the right to proselytize and convert but did find it accurate. End Note) They had feared that it could have rekindled intra-Christian strife that occurred after the government expelled thirty evangelicals in late 2007 and early 2008 and the subsequent Council of Church Leaders' public statement backing the

government's expulsions. Their focus over the past year has been to mend fences with the government and Council of Church leaders. (Note: The Council of Church Leaders is now comprised of ten of the eleven recognized Christian denominations and is consulted by the government when determining which Christian denominations should receive recognition. Evangelical denominations are not recognized but are registered as societies. End Note). Evangelical church leaders are also trying to project a positive image for their denominations' role in Jordanian society instead of vocally highlighting "negative" religious freedom issues. The hope is that this conciliatory approach will lead to official recognition for evangelicals. The positive general reaction to the report and focus on underlying systemic religious freedom issues meant that traditional churches, such as the Orthodox and Roman Catholic, did not blame evangelical denominations for overly influencing the report's content and "tarnishing" the image of Jordanian Christians.

#### Government and Media Focus on the Positives

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¶4. (C) The government's public response to the report solely highlighted Jordan's inter-faith work. Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communication Nabil Al-Sharif told reporters the government was pleased with the report's content, calling Jordan "a model for coexistence between religions." Dr. Manal Mazareh, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) Human Rights Office, admitted to Poloffs on November 1 that there are religious freedom issues that must be addressed, specifically mentioning the treatment of the Baha'i. Though she would not

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comment on what, if any, specific actions would be taken to improve religious freedom, Mazareh stated the report will be formally discussed by the inter-ministerial human rights groups led by the MFA and an official response prepared. (Note: The Government of Jordan has traditionally issued a private, detailed response to USG human rights reports. A response to the 2008 Human Rights Report was just recently received by Post. End Note)

¶5. (SBU) In response to an Embassy Amman press announcement about the report's release, most daily newspapers' coverage placed an emphasis on Secretary Clinton's praise of Jordan's inter-faith efforts and the "good" relationship between Christians and Muslims. While headlines and articles led with positive aspects of the report and cited a high-level of religious freedom, some problem areas were also mentioned, such as continued official discrimination of minority religious groups. On-line news sites also covered the report with two prominent sites posting translations. Ammannet.net, an independent radio and on-line news site, translated the entire report while Ammun News, an independent site covering domestic issues, posted excerpts from each section of the report. As in past years, there were a couple editorials in the mainstream media criticizing the U.S. for judging other countries when its own record, especially related to Israel, is problematic.

#### More on Education Needed to Promote Tolerance Among Youth

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¶6. (C) Some Christian contacts thought more emphasis should be placed on education. The main problem, in their view, is not related to their right to worship, the existence of official discrimination, or restrictions on conversion and proselytizing but what Jordan's youth is taught about religion and mutual respect. Several contacts indicated that the Royal Court and government are either unwilling or unable to effectively promulgate the Amman Message and Common Word initiatives, which respectively lay-out a moderate version of Islam and mutual respect between religions, at the community level and within the education system. Subject matter in nearly all subjects, including social studies and Arabic

language and history, are reported to include both negative stereotypes of other religions and non-moderate Islamic teachings. One Evangelical contact, for example, stated that the final high school exam (tawajji) for Islamic studies included content that killing apostates and adulterers is permissible. They also believe that public school teachers are becoming less moderate and are leading to a more radical and less tolerant citizenry. Father Khalil Jarrar of the Catholic Church, for instance, stated that 67 percent of public school teachers are "fanatics." Though Jarrar did not indicate the source of this statistic, he and others cited specific examples, such as one teacher ordering all unveiled girls to sit at the back of the classroom. In short, some Christian leaders state that they are viewing first-hand deterioration in their "good" relationship with the Muslim communities and an increasing less tolerant generation of Jordanian society. Other Christian contacts have not painted such a dire situation but are also concerned. Father Samer Azer of the Lutheran Church, for instance, talked about their good standing in the community and the many church activities which include their Muslim neighbors. He too, however, is concerned about youth mentality and agrees that more inter-faith work must be done at the community level.

¶7. (C) Comment: With fewer gross religious freedom violations over the past year, the 2009 report was considered less controversial in nature than the 2008 report. The relative lack of gross violations also meant that the 2009 report and corresponding dialogue focused on underlying religious freedom issues, many directly related to Jordan's legal framework and institutions. While Post does not anticipate any major structural changes in the foreseeable future, the report has helped Post to continue a dialogue about persistent problems and to discuss possible solutions. For example, Post is:

--addressing existing legal discrimination, such as difficulties in obtaining official documentation for unrecognized religious groups.

--pushing to eliminate the religion designation from national identification cards.

--encouraging the government to turn inter-faith dialogue initiatives into tangible inter-faith partnerships at the community level.

--discussing the need for continued education reform and to focus on potentially harmful curriculum and teaching methods.

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End Comment.  
Beecroft